



**The Sacramento Bee**  
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## Got brownies?

**The beloved chocolate treat offers endless variations**

**By Dan Vierria -- Bee Home & Garden Writer**

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Carved into chocolaty squares, brownies are sweetly seductive. You don't need Siegfried & Roy to make a platter of brownies disappear.

"There's no such thing as a bad brownie," says Bruce Weinstein, author of "The Ultimate Brownie Book" (William Morrow, \$16.95). "Brownies are the quintessential American dessert."

Weinstein says brownies are virtually unknown in other countries, yet here they inspire passionate devotion.

"Brownies bring back a lot of childhood memories," he says. "With the events of last year, people are looking for more homey, comfortable things in their lives. It's sort of a patriotic dessert."

Dressed up in red, white and blue or just plain brown, brownies have an enduring popularity that can't be denied.

"When I was a child, my grandma would come over every week, and she'd always have a box of chocolate chip cookies, brownies and chocolate cake," says Marlene Goetzeler of Sacramento's Freeport Bakery. "We'd all try to get to the brownies first."

Brownies have been a favorite of Freeport Bakery customers for years, Goetzeler says. The bakery makes two versions -- regular and with fudge topping.

Folklore has it that American brownies were created when a 19th century home cook left baking powder out of her chocolate cake batter. The deflated cake was then cut into squares and drew rave reviews from the family.

Brownies have more than one alleged origin. Some say they were created when a woman dropped her freshly baked chocolate cake, which collapsed on impact. Thus, the brownie. Then there are the Scottish immigrants who may have laid the foundation for brownies by baking cocoa-flavored scones.



Judged the best of the best in The Bee's brownie competition, Betty's Best Brownies cuddle up to a scoop of ice cream. On the second plate are other finalists in the contest, which drew more than 200 entries.

**Sacramento Bee/Owen Brewer**

Chicago pastry chef and free-lance food writer Annie Overboe researched the origin of brownies over a six-month period but couldn't pinpoint their date of birth or parentage.

"Unlike other desserts that have very clear origins in Europe, we do know brownies have their roots here," says Overboe, who ranks brownies as American as chocolate chip cookies and apple pie.

According to Weinstein's book, the first brownies were "molasses-rich cakes" that were browned in the oven. No chocolate was used. Later, chocolate was added to the recipe and brownies began their evolution. A huge hit during the Roaring 20s, the brownie has been a popular dessert since.

It's become traditional to pass along the family brownie recipe. There are nearly as many variations as stars in the sky. Two schools of thought clash on the perfect brownie texture -- fudgy-goey or cakelike.

Fudgy-goey brownies are soft, decadent and may seem to have been extracted from the oven before being fully cooked. Chocolate may cling to your fingers, which isn't a bad thing.

Cake brownies are lighter, hold together better and are more structurally sound for frostings and other toppings.

"I like something in between, ones that ride the middle between cakey and fudgy," says Weinstein. "Like the 'Lunch Box Brownies' (from his book; see recipe at right). They cut nicely."

Overboe recommends doing some homework before baking brownies for guests. Once you discover their likes and dislikes you can bake "perfect" brownies -- which is a very subjective thing.

"I'll try to find out their expectations," she says. "Cake or fudgy or frosted? Listen to what people are telling you, ask questions and know what your recipe is going to produce. Delivering what people expect is the secret to great baking."

If you're going to attempt world-class brownies, quality chocolate and butter are essential. Weinstein says to use the best ingredients you can comfortably afford.

"There's going to be a difference between packaged chocolate chips and European chocolate," he says. "The quality of chocolate will give you a different brownie."

Overboe, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, recommends using unsalted butter. And she's adamant about not using Crisco. Use quality chocolate or good European cocoa powder (Dutch-processed), brown sugar and, if you're partial to nuts, use pecans, she says. When using chocolate chips, choose miniatures.

"With miniature chips, you get the chocolate boost without those big clunky chunks in the brownie," she says. "When I think of a brownie, I see a package, not individual things standing out. Good brownies are a partnership of ingredients."

Packaged brownie mixes are OK, too, says Weinstein.

"If you don't have time to make them from scratch, they have their place," says

Weinstein, who devoted a chapter in his book to upgrading brownie mix recipes. "If you grew up with mixes and want to keep them in your life, then they have their place. But if you want to increase the flavor a little bit, you can always make them richer and fancier."

All brownies, from packaged mixes or made from scratch, need to be paired with the perfect beverage.

"Nothing better than a brownie and an ice-cold glass of milk," Goetzeler says.

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## Lunch box brownies

Prep time: 20 min., Cook time: 40 min., Makes 24 brownies

Covered with plastic wrap, these brownies will stay fresh for two days. They can be tightly wrapped in wax paper, sealed in a freezer-safe bag and frozen for up to four months.

### \* Ingredients:

1/2 pound (2 sticks) unsalted butter, plus additional for the pan, at room temperature  
1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour, plus additional for the pan  
1 teaspoon baking powder  
1 teaspoon salt  
4 ounces unsweetened chocolate, chopped  
2 cups sugar  
3 large eggs, at room temperature  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

### \* Instructions:

Position the rack in the lower third of the oven. Heat the oven to 350 degrees. Butter and flour a 9-by-13-inch baking pan; set it aside.

In a medium bowl, whisk the flour, baking powder and salt until well combined. Set aside.

Place the butter and chocolate in the top of a double boiler set over simmering water. If you don't have a double boiler, place the butter and chocolate in a heat-safe bowl that fits snugly over a small pot of simmering water. Stir constantly until half the butter and chocolate is melted. Remove the top of the double boiler or the bowl from the pot; then continue stirring, away from the heat, until the butter and chocolate are completely melted. Transfer the chocolate mixture to a large bowl and allow it to cool for 5 minutes.

Beat the sugar into the chocolate mixture with a whisk or an electric mixer at medium speed; continue beating until the mixture is smooth and the sugar is completely dissolved, about 6 minutes by hand or 3 minutes with the mixer. Beat in the eggs one at a time, allowing each to be thoroughly incorporated before adding the next. After beating in the third egg for 1 minute, beat in the vanilla.

Stir in the flour mixture just until incorporated. Do not beat, although the batter will be very thick. Spoon the batter into the prepared pan, spreading it gently to the corners.

Bake for 30 minutes, or until a toothpick or cake tester comes out with a few moist crumbs attached. Set the pan on a wire rack and allow to cool for 1 hour. Cut the brownies into 24 pieces while they're still in the pan. Carefully remove them with an offset spatula. Serve immediately

Per serving: 195 cal.; 2 g pro.; 24 g carb.; 11 g fat (7 sat., 3 monounsat., 1 polyunsat.); 47 mg chol.; 127 mg sod.; 1 g fiber; 16 g sugar; 48 percent calories from fat.

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#### About the Writer

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Contest winner Betty Virgen, left, and third-place finisher Linda Morales compare their brownies.

[Sacramento Bee/Owen Brewer](#)

## Searching for the very best brownies: What a treat!

**By Gwen Schoen -- Bee Staff Writer**

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We were looking for the ultimate brownie. The one that tasted so good it would bring tears to your eyes, the one that would leave you crying for more when the pan was empty.

Taste readers rallied to the challenge, sending in more than 200 recipes after we announced a contest to find the region's best brownies. In going over the entries, we were astounded to discover how many different ways there were to make brownies. There were frosted brownies, brownies with mint, some with liqueur,



Catherine Robbins of Paradise shows off her brownies, which include toasted walnuts. The recipe took second place in The Bee's competition.

[Sacramento Bee/Owen Brewer](#)

some with caramels and other simple, basic bars.

How to choose the best?

We read through the recipes, sorting them into several categories, such as ones that use mint, ones made with syrup and brownies filled with things like raspberry jam. Then we selected 12 recipes, some from each category to be tasted. The 12 finalists each dropped off samples and we settled in to taste and judge.

The lucky judges were Walter and Marlene Goetzeler of Freeport Bakery, one of Sacramento's best-known bakeries. It is especially beloved for its chocolate desserts.

"For me, brownies should be a simple treat," says Walter. "They are the kind of thing you enjoy with your children after school, not an elegant dessert."

For Marlene, a true chocolate hound, it's not only the texture but the quality of the chocolate.

"They need to be fudgy and dense but not raw," she says. "Just a minute or two, more or less, in the oven can make all the difference. You should taste chocolate -- and it should be good chocolate."

Selecting a winner was difficult. All of the samples truly were worthy of mention. First place went to Betty's Best Brownies, baked by Betty Virgen of south Sacramento. In second place were Catherine Robbins' Brownies From Paradise. Linda Morales of Rancho Cordova captured third place for her Mint Brownies.

Virgen's recipe is made with semi-sweet chocolate chips, unsweetened chocolate and brown sugar. We think it might be the addition of the brown sugar that keeps them so moist. Her secret ingredient, though, is chopped-up Kraft caramels stirred into the batter.

"I developed the recipe when I owned a deli many years ago," she says. "I wanted a truly fudgy brownie. Later I tried adding the caramels as an experiment and my family really liked the variation, so that's how I always make them now."

Amazingly, in 1985 Virgen entered a different brownie recipe in a contest sponsored by The Bee and won an honorable mention. We've concluded that she must be the brownie queen of the region.

Robbins, the runner-up, also makes her brownies with brown sugar, but she adds toasted walnuts. Like Virgen's, her brownies are not frosted. In reality, they are very basic brownies, but that's what brought them to the attention of the judges.

"I was inspired by a brownie I bought at a natural-foods store in Tahoe many years ago," says Robbins. "The baker wouldn't give me her recipe, but she said the secret was brown sugar."

Morales' brownies are sure to please everyone who loves a chocolate and mint combination. It's also a very simple recipe to make.

Many thanks to all who entered. This was one tasty contest.

## First Place: Betty's Best Brownies

Prep time: 15 minutes, Cook time: 25 minutes, Makes: 24

Betty Virgen of south Sacramento created this family-favorite brownie recipe, which calls for the addition of chopped-up caramels. She recommends waiting a day before you cut them into bars, but who could do that?

### \* Ingredients:

1 12-ounce package semisweet chocolate chips  
4 ounces (4 squares) unsweetened chocolate, chopped  
2 sticks (1 cup) butter  
5 large eggs, at room temperature  
1 cup granulated sugar  
1/2 cup light brown sugar, packed  
1 teaspoon vanilla  
3/4 cup flour  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
8 ounces Kraft caramels, cut into small pieces  
1 cup nuts, chopped (walnuts or pecans)

### \* Instructions:

Melt chocolate chips, unsweetened chocolate and butter in a microwave-safe bowl or in a double boiler until melted and smooth; set aside to cool until warm. In a mixer bowl, beat eggs until thick, about 3 minutes. Gradually add sugars, beating mixture until light and fluffy. By hand, stir in vanilla and chocolate mixture just until blended. Toss caramels and nuts in flour-salt mixture; stir into chocolate mixture just until blended. Pour into prepared pan and smooth top. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes; the top of the brownies will be shiny. Do not bake longer than 25 minutes. Remove from the oven and cool completely before cutting into squares.

Per serving: 311 cal.; 5 g pro.; 34 g carb.; 19 g fat (10 sat., 6 monounsatur., 3 polyunsatur.); 66 mg chol.; 92 mg sod.; 2 g fiber; 53 percent calories from fat.

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## Second Place: Brownies From Paradise

Prep time: 25 min., Cook time: 35 min., Makes: 24

The second-place winner in The Bee's brownie contest is Catherine Robbins of Paradise. Her recipe is basic but does call for brown sugar, a secret she learned from a professional baker at Lake Tahoe.

### \* Ingredients:

8 1-ounce squares unsweetened chocolate  
2 cubes butter (no substitutions)  
5 eggs  
1 cup sugar  
2 cups brown sugar  
2 tablespoons vanilla  
1 1/2 cups flour  
2 cups coarsely chopped, toasted walnuts

**\* Instructions:**

In a heavy saucepan over low heat, melt the chocolate and butter. While mixture is cooling, beat the eggs, sugars and vanilla in a large mixing bowl for 10 minutes at high speed (yes, 10 minutes). Blend in the cooled chocolate mixture. Add the flour, beat until just blended. Stir in the nuts. Pour and spread mixture in a buttered 13-by-9-inch pan. Bake for 35 to 40 minutes at 375 degrees. Brownies are done when a toothpick inserted into center comes out almost clean. Cool completely, cut into serving size desired. Enjoy!

Per serving: 329 cal.; 6 g pro.; 36 g carb.; 20 g fat (9 sat., 6 monounsatur., 5 polyunsatur.); 65 mg chol.; 23 mg sod.; 2 g fiber; 26 g sugar; 51 percent calories from fat.

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**Third Place: Mint Brownies**

Prep time: 20 minutes, Cook time: 50 minutes, Makes: 24

These brownies are almost too pretty to eat. Almost. If you like the combination of mint and chocolate, you'll love this easy recipe sent in by Linda Morales of Rancho Cordova. She won third place.

**\* Ingredients:**

3 sticks of butter (melted)  
3 cups sugar  
1 tablespoon vanilla extract  
5 eggs  
2 cups all-purpose flour  
1 cup Hershey's cocoa  
1 teaspoon baking powder  
52 small peppermint patties (unwrapped)

**\* Instructions:**

Heat oven to 350 degrees (glass pan -- 325 degrees). Line 13-by-9-by-2-inch pan with aluminum foil. In large bowl, stir together butter, sugar and vanilla. Add eggs, stir until well blended. Stir in flour, cocoa and baking powder; blend well. Reserve 2 cups batter. Spread remaining batter into prepared pan. Arrange 40 of the peppermint patties in a single layer over batter. Spread reserved 2 cups of batter over patties. Bake 50 to 55 minutes (brownies should begin to pull away from the sides of pan).

Turn off oven and top with remaining 12 peppermint patties. Let patties melt, then remove brownies from the oven. Spread melted patties over the top of the brownies. Cool for 15 to 20 minutes. Lift brownies out of the pan, let them cool and cut into squares.

Per serving: 440 cal.; 4 g pro.; 72 g carb.; 16 g fat (10 sat., 5 monounsatur., 1 polyunsatur.); 76 mg chol.; 47 mg sod.; 2 g fiber; 53 g sugar; 33 percent calories from fat.

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**About the Writer**  
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Marlene and Walter Goetzler of Freeport Bakery judge The Bee's brownie competition. Great brownies "need to be fudgy and dense but not raw," says Marlene.

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## A few tips for making great brownies

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- \* Melted bittersweet chocolate is the best choice for brownies. Other chocolates -- semisweet, Mexican, milk, unsweetened and white -can also be used, depending on the recipe and personal taste.
- \* Overcooked brownies will be dry and can become hard. When in doubt, pull brownies from the oven earlier rather than later. Brownies retain more moisture when slightly undercooked.
- \* Recommended nuts to use in brownies: walnuts, pecans and almonds. Taste nuts first because rancid nuts can ruin brownies. Don't use salted nuts unless the recipe specifically calls for them.
- \* Pure vanilla extract is far superior in flavor to artificial vanilla, which is cheaper. Other extracts to consider: peppermint, wintergreen, spearmint, banana, maple and rum.
- \* Brownies can be frosted or topped with peanut butter or jam.
- \* Cake-texture brownies travel better than fudge-texture brownies.

Source: Bruce Weinstein, author of "The Ultimate Brownie Book" (William Morrow, \$16.95)